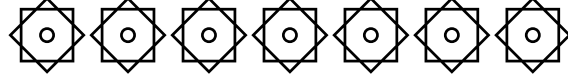


# Religious & Islamic Expressions

When religion escapes clergy

العبارات الدينية والإسلامية



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## **Introduction**

### **How it started?**

I have been writing books about Arabic language and culture for many years, particularly, textbooks for teaching spoken and written Arabic, grammar and glossaries. The challenges have been to offer a radically modern approach based on modern methods and modern linguistics. I aimed at separating language from its sacredness offering it as a tool to both the secular and the heritage/faithful learners. The faithful learner can still benefit from the secular approach for a faster progress, but not vice-versa, because the casual or secular learner needs only the modern simple language linked to today's usage. The Arabic sacredness is costing an extra time and efforts due to keeping its medieval ornament and rhetoric that may fascinate the passionate faithful learner. It may otherwise frustrate the secular learners who see complexity and outdatedness rather than beauty. Consequently, it is causing high dropouts among all learners despite the increasing global demand to learn Arabic. I am fond of Arabic medieval beauty but against imposing it on the beginners. Advanced learners may appreciate Arabic ornament and complexity but based on their own choice, because we still have the advanced relatively plain high Arabic, namely Modern Standard Arabic MSA.

Difficulties and obstacles in learning Arabic are numerous and come from every direction; that includes archaic vocabulary and grammar, controversial pronunciations, diglossia and dialects rich diversity, distinct types of phrases such as religious and polite phrases that are rarely found in other cultures in the same quantity and essential role in both formal and informal language usage.

Considerable efforts have been made to produce a modern Arabic in 19<sup>th</sup> century to be used in the press, but with a relative success due to its original sacredness, therefore, the modernization was limited, in my opinion. Dropping many archaic words was an advantage and necessary in MSA, but on the other hand, keeping most of the archaic grammar, abandoning the special phrases and abandoning spoken Arabic have caused MSA to remain an elitist type of Arabic. It simply values old and modern poetry more than the common people's old or new language. MSA could have been more effective if it was updated and modernized to come closer to the modern spoken Arabic.

Surprisingly, it tried to avoid people's language and widen the gap between formal and informal Arabic, especially when introducing it. Later, native speakers would realize the hidden similarity, but non-natives would struggle much longer to discover the hidden unity and similarity that would otherwise be a good basis for any type of Arabic and any further development.

It sounds weird compared to other nations with rich heritage such as the Greece and Russia, which modernized their languages to meet the public demand, while Arabic

modernization has paused somewhere between medieval and the people's modern spoken version. I think, partly because of the Arabic language sacredness on one hand, then moving from the foreign rule of Ottoman to the French/English colonization of the Middle East, to the dictatorships that marked the independence on the other hand, have contributed to marginalization of the people's needs including the language as a tool and a container of education. Consequently, we have an elitist Arabic that seems compatible with elitist oppressive political systems with remarkably high military and security budgets versus low educational and scientific research budgets.

### **Starting this book**

After teaching Arabic to non-natives for many years, I realized a particular type of phrases that sounds religious but sometimes or often are used out of regular religious context. Unlike other expressions and slogans, religious phrases and symbols in real life are almost everywhere in the Arab Islamic world not only in religious places. They are used almost in every conversation, and are written on plates and hanged on the walls of homes and shops, on cars, neckless, baby's spell, schools and businesses. It is a rich and influential layer of communication that is cross-religion, cross sectarian and cross-ethnicity. It is one of the hidden wonders of Middle East mosaic culture.

Religion in the Middle East has been a vital issue throughout the history. It played a significant role in developing, dividing and destabilizing the region. Monotheistic religions, Judaism – Christianity – Islam and other minor religions are deeply interrelated to which they may borrow each other's popular expressions among other things (some even share the same shrines such as in central Syria). The phrases and expressions usually used for swearing the oath, prayers, social occasions, idioms and other phrases of religious, sacred, mythological significance. Naturally, when borrowed, the expression needed replacing any symbol from the source to the target religion –but keeping the structure plus neutral words- in order to be compatible with the new religion that intolerantly resisting extinction or at least integration, and struggling to maintain its identity.

Bearing in mind that underneath the modern unstable Middle East, there have been informal people-to-people interactions and cultural exchange away from politics, the clergy and the struggle for power, even in the most sensitive area; the sacred area, the religion.

In this book, I will not focus on the shared or similar myths, religious rituals or beliefs, because I have read and heard about them within the multiple religious and sectarian conflicts, unfortunately and mainly to prove that every religion is the authentic one. I will analyze, categorize and explain the originally religious but overwhelmingly common language, plus various versions when available, with cultural background and a careful mythical explanation in order to avoid the polemic exhaustive debates of religious, atheistic and minorities' clergy and intellectuals.

### **Significance presence in every daily conversation:**

Religious expressions are often used in almost every daily conversation even for non-religious purposes and even used by non-religious people. Sometimes, it is hard for the non-native speaker to distinguish between the religious and non-religious purpose of the expression. Probably, the overuse of the religious expressions with the elapse of time has eroded their sharpness and caused the loss of most of their original significance, and turned it into any worldly purpose. Another reason maybe the dominant religious culture throughout the history of the Arab-Islamic world while modernity is slowly leaking gradually and informally. I think, theologically, many worldly matters such as honesty, begging for mercy; having good intention and many other moral or philosophical issues are easily connected to faith and religion. Probably, these matters move back and forth between religious and non-religious significance based on the mainstream social development. In Arabic, the expression seems to stay forever and survive the change such as Alhamdulillah الحمد لله (for thank God/luckily) and Inshallah إن شاء الله (God's willing/hopefully) are now quite universal. In the Arab/Islamic world, surprisingly, they and many other religious expressions are used by religious and pious people, common people, secular and ironically, even by atheist people. Naturally, the most common phrases are on every tongue including foreign workers who speak a basic broken Arabic, but the list goes on.

The simple trick to recognize how serious the speaker is in swearing the oath and praying is the expression length plus tone and the situation i.e. والله is the shortest and most casual. The more common and usually the shorter the expression is the more casual, and vice-versa. Table below shows approximately degrees of seriousness in which 1 is ranked weakest and a higher number is stronger.

درجات الجدية degree of seriousness			6	5	4	3	2	1
حلف اليمين Swearing the oath		أقسم بالله العظيم أن أكون مخلصاً ل	أقسم بالله العظيم أن أقول الحق	أقسم بالله والله على ما أقول شهاد	والله وتالله وبالله	والله العظيم	والله	والله
					وحياة الأنبياء والرسل	وحياة الأنبياء	وحياة الله	
						وحياة المصحف/القرآن	والمصحف/القرآن	

الحياة اليومية	الحياة اليومية مع التوكيد	موقف جدي	موقف أكثر جدية	محكمة	خطاب تنصيب	الموقف – الحالة situations	
أدعية قصيرة بمعنى شكرًا: الله يسلّمك – الله يحفظك	أدعية قصيرة بمعنى أرجوك:	أدعية للشكر العميق والامتنان	أدعية توسل لناس مهمين	أدعية لله ولأنبياء ولمشايخ وأئمة وأولياء صالحين	أدعية لله ولأنبياء ولمشايخ وأئمة وأولياء		الدعاء Prayer expressions
للتواصل مع الناس	للتواصل مع الله أو بعد الصلاة	مخاطبة مدراء	في البيت أو أي مكان	في الأضرحة والمقامات	الموقف/الحالة situations		

### Categories of religious, Islamic, faith and beliefs phrases

Due to the observed diversity and relative distinctions, I wished to divide them to different categories. For the sake of easier approach plus, having different purposes, situations occasions and structures helped divide the phrases to the current categories.

However, it took years of researching teaching and observation to help collect, organize and categorize the phrases. Certain patterns in meaning and structure seemed applicable to specific categories such as prayer phrases, swearing the oath, idioms, expressions linked to certain occasions and titles. With all deviation witnessed over the years, the phrases are still relevant to both the strict clergy teaching and the new derived meaning based on the situation whether solemn or casual.

The new usages are often a merely softened and more diverse version due to unlimited living situations compared to the predictable religious usages in mosques, churches, shrines or the court.

Due to sensitivity of the issues relating to religion and faith, it needed double caution added to my respect and my personal belonging and fascination of our cultural diversity. Therefore, not only scientific considerations drove me to sort the phrases out, but also moral obligations.

On the other hand, the initial categories have not been the noticeable challenge; the issue was the numerous branches within each categories plus the dozens of situations that the given phrases are used. Before that, I had had difficulties collecting phrases from

minorities' religions and sects, bearing in mind their secretive nature dating back to the medieval time.

Prayer expressions or what is better calling “originally” prayer expressions, with their sub-categories based on the purpose, and swearing the oath expressions have been easy to recognize and sort out, in terms of topic, situation and structure. Expressions of certain occasions and titles-nicknames of sacred or mysterious ancestors and old spiritual leaders were also predictable but with narrower usages. A broader category remains harder to put into a strict analysis that are the idioms and other phrases of religious and mythical origins and the common Quranic and faith phrases.

Religious and faith principles were a summary or the essence of most of the phrases contents and indications. It is meant to be a basic guide to pieces of the most popular beliefs and values that one can make casual phrases complying with them similar to the native speakers. It is worth mentioning that many native speakers do not master the original phrases, but based on the same principles, they make their own spontaneous phrases. The similar/alternative phrases still deliver almost the same messages, and display a conformity with the majority of the population for the sake of countless gains and advantages mentioned above.

### **Translation challenges:**

I have written and have been writing books on Arabic proverbs, Arabic idioms among other books on Arabic textbooks, grammar and phrases and expressions, the challenge of translating, when needed, was obvious such as in proverbs and idioms. Usually, the interpretation and sometimes with context usage bridged the big gap between the literal and the actual/communicative meaning. Cultural and historical background was offered when the interpretation seemed insufficient due to a unique case, belief, phenomena or tradition.

The tremendous challenge comes with the polite expressions and the religious phrases. The whole system is unique in terms the huge number of phrases, the sophistication and the importance in daily life. Therefore, they, the polite and the religious phrases, needed an extensive background explanation

I think, religious phrases have gradually faded in English speaking world and in most of the liberal world since the church power shrunk in the renaissance age.

### **Conclusion:**

Islamic & religious expressions used informally in daily life and on various occasions in the Middle East enjoy the following characteristics:

- \* **Deeply Embedded in Culture:** Islam and other religions and sects play a central role in Middle Eastern societies. These expressions aren't just words, they reflect a worldview and values. Saying "Alhamdulillah (praise be to God)" after a good meal is not just gratitude, it acknowledges God's provision.

- \* **Versatility and Fluidity:** These expressions are used across social situations, from greetings ("Assalamu alaykum" - peace be upon you) to exclamations ("Subhanallah" -

God is glorified) to well wishes ("Inshallah" - God willing). They weave religion into the fabric of everyday life.

\* **Shared Identity and Community:** Using these phrases creates a sense of belonging and shared identity among Muslims. It signifies they understand the cultural and religious references.

\* **Emotional Impact:** Expressions like "MashaAllah (God has willed it)" can convey a range of emotions - acceptance, awe, or resignation - depending on the context.

\* **Local Variations:** While some phrases are universal, others may have specific meanings or uses depending on the region or culture.

Knowing these expressions can help you:

\***Build connection** with people in the Middle East

\***Gain insights** into their culture and values

\***Navigate social situations** more effectively

Finally, the beauty and complexity of these expressions lie in their deep connection to the rich culture of the Middle East. A culture that hosts multiple complex identities each tries to keep the unity in the nation within the fascinating diversity.

## 1. Swearing the oath (القسم) (Arabic version below)

Typically, swearing the oath is used to confirm a statement using deity or any sacred or valuable symbol in order to be taken seriously and prove honesty. For several reasons, people do not seem to take each other seriously even if they show so. Caution and even suspicion are part of human nature, and for the sake of effective communication, one may need to offer a truthful impressive statement expecting certain benefits or at least a credibility.

This phenomenon seems somehow universal, but in Arabic and the Arab-Islamic world, swearing the oath phrases are remarkably amplified to cover broader activities, situations, diverse vocabulary and phrases, used by more people of multiple backgrounds, and subsequently, I assume, more obvious than other languages and cultures. Probably, the overuse of swearing the oath phrases has weakened their religious impact which religion and the clergy have set, and it did not please them to see their sacred phrases fade and lose the strict rules they were supposed to control the usage.

Swearing the oath phrases vary in their structure and content, and usually the native speakers of Arabic recognize whether the speaker is serious or casual based on content, structure, the tone and context. The Qur'an tolerated the casual usage of oath لا يؤاخذكم الله باللغو في أيمانكم بل يؤاخذكم بما عقدتم الأيمان – المائدة 89 – لا يؤاخذكم الله باللغو في أيمانكم ولكن (يؤاخذكم بما كسبت قلوبكم – البقرة 225) which means roughly “*God does not blame you for swearing the oath spontaneously or unintentionally, but when you are determined to do so*”. Therefore, I think, it is an old common tradition since 7<sup>th</sup> century or before, and it has been a problematic issue to distinguish between being serious or not.

### - القسم الأول: القسم أو حلف اليمين:

- **القسم:** هو أسلوب لتوكيد الكلام عن طريق الذات الإلهية أو شخصية مباركة أو مقدسة أو شخص أو شيء غالي إلى درجة كبيرة، في الثقافة العربية يعتبر القسم من العناصر الجوهرية للغة وخاصة في العربية المحكية، فنادر ما نرى محادثة من دون قسم مهما كان موضوع المحادثة. ويشكل عام كلما زادت أهمية الموضوع أو القضية زاد استعمال القسم، ويبدأ الشخص باستعمال القسم منذ الطفولة بشكل عفوي من دون وعي لمعناه المستقل عن الكلام، ولكنه يبدأ في الطفولة بعد أن يتعلم الطفل الكذب. يتعلم الطفل في البداية النكران في عمر (5/4) سنين لتجنب العقوبة، ثم يتعلم الإخفاء ربما في سن ما بين (6 – 8)، وتقريباً في سن العاشرة يبدأ في تعلم الكذب فيستطيع تخيل قصة ملفقة كبديل عن القصة الحقيقية التي قد تجلب له العقوبة، بعد ذلك يتعلم حلف الأيمان ليصدق الآخرين وغالباً كلما كذب أكثر كلما زاد حلفانه، ويبدأ بالقسم بالله ثم ينتقل إلى مواضيع القسم السبعة الأخرى بالتدرج. يستعمل الناس القسم بمختلف أنواعهم الغني والفقير، المتعلم والجاهل، ولكن يتميز أهل الريف بحلفانهم بمشايخ مشهورة لهم أضرحة ومزارات في منطقتهم وبيئتهم المحلية مثال: (وحياة الباز عبد القادر). كما يتميز المتدينون بالتزامهم بالقسم الديني ويحصر بالقسم بالله والرسول والكتاب المقدس، ويتجنبون مواضيع القسم الأخرى لأنهم يكرهون تقديس أشياء غير الله ونبيه وكتابه.



**- تركيب عبارة القسم: The structure of the oath phrase**

الإضافة لجملة القسم (حرف أو كلمة) Prefix, words, or letters used with the oath phrase	نص جملة القسم The text of the oath phrase	المعنى Meaning <i>I Swear By (ISB)</i>
- بإضافة (و) في بداية الجملة	ورحمة أمي، والنبي	I Swear By (ISP) My mother's mercy (my honesty in wishing my mother to have God's mercy). ISB the Prophet.
بإضافة (وحياة) بأول الجملة	وحياة الله، وحياة عيون أمي	ISB God/Allah. ISB my mother's eyes.
بإضافة (علي) بأول الجملة	علي الطلاق، (تشهد) علي الجيرة، علي الحرام	(Be a witness!) I swear I will divorce if I am wrong.
بإضافة (بـ) بأول الكلمة	بشبابي، بصحتي	ISB my youth. ISB my health.
إضافة (بـ) بأول الكلمة لطلب القسم	بذمتك؟ بشرفك؟ بالله؟	Swear by your credibility, your honor, God/Allah! (Asking someone to swear).
بإضافة كلمة (برحمة) للمتوفي	برحمة أمي ، برحمة الغوالي	ISB my mother's mercy (my honesty in wishing my mother to have God's mercy). ISB the mercy of the dear ones.
بإضافة كلمة (برحمة) لطلب القسم	برحمة أبوك؟، برحمة عيون أمك؟	Swear by your father's mercy/your mother's eye's mercy. (Asking someone to swear).
بداية الجملة بـ (أقسم بـ)	أقسم بالله	ISB God/Allah.
بداية الجملة بـ (أحلف لك بـ)	أحلف لك بالمصحف (بالقرآن)/بالإنجيل	ISB the Qur'an, the bible.
بداية الجملة بـ (وحق) الله		

**The topics and contents of swearing the oath**

Naturally, deity, saints, Imams, Sheiks, pious ancestors, mythical characters, and other sacred people and values. Their values range from universally regular saint status to surprisingly dignifying average objects and people such as one's own mustache, gray hair or his/her mother's eyes. The scope of Arabic phrases of swearing the oath mainly informally expands to include unfamiliar symbols or entities of sacredness and sanctification.

I will present a simple background analysis to a few of uncommon swearing.

*Swearing by Gray Hair:* I think, despite seeming unfamiliar, investigating carefully each symbol would reveal ancient roots of sanctification such as dignifying elderly people,

which leads to considering the gray hair a symbol of wisdom. In ancient times, when living experience was the main source of knowledge and wisdom in the lack of modern education, whereas now, specialists lead information and gain the respect. Then, swearing by one's gray hair can make more sense and remind us of our ties with the past in case they have weakened. The high social status of elderly people is still valid in the Arab-Islamic-Middle Eastern world today. In conservative urban and rural communities, elder members of the extended family still play a vital role to determine their younger members' critical issues. The elderly power could range from helping the youth establishing a new business to arranging marriages in the light of unreliable government support or the lack of security and any insurance.

- ونستطيع تقسيم مواضع القسم بشكل لافت إلى سبع أقسام كما يلي:
- 1- من القسم بالله إلى القسم بالأنبياء نزولاً إلى الأولياء الصالحين من أئمة ومشايخ والقديسين والكتب الدينية المقدسة، ثم أعضاء العائلة المقربين الأحياء منهم والأموات مثل الأب والأم والأخ والأخت والابن والابنة، ثم بأعضاء الجسم الحيوية الظاهرة مثل (العيون، الشوارب، الشباب، الشبيبة، الصحة، العافية).

وحياة الله	وحياة المصحف
والله	وحياة المسيح
وحياة الرب	وحياة العذرا
والرب / بربي	وحياة الصليب
والله العظيم	وحياة الإنجيل
قسماً بالله	وحياة أمي
الله وكيلك	وحياة أبي
عليك الله	وحياة أبنّي
يشهد الله	وحياة أخي
وحياة النبي	برحمة أمي
والنبي	برحمة أخي
وعزة النبي	برحمة جدي
وحياة الرسول	بعيوني
وحياة الأنبياء	وحياة شواربي
وحياة محمد	بشبابي
وعزة محمد	بحياة هالشبيبة
وعزة الإمام علي	بعيوني / بنصري / ينظري
وحياة ليلة القدر	بصحتي / بعافيتي
وحياة القرآن	الشهادة لله
وحق الله/النبي/المصحف	

## 2-الجمع بين أعضاء الجسم وفرد من العائلة. مثل:

بروح أمي	وحياة عيونك
بعيون أخي	
براس أبنّي	
بصحة أبنّي	
بشباب ولادي	
وحياتك	